DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH LIEUTENANT COLONEL RONALD WILT, U.S. AIR FORCE RESERVE, AND MASTER SERGEANT JEFFREY FLIGHT, U.S. AIR FORCE RESERVE, VIA TELECONFERENCE SUBJECT: AIR FORCE RESERVE FIREFIGHTING IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA TIME: 10:00 A.M. EDT DATE: FRIDAY, JULY 11, 2008

(Note: Please refer to www.dod.mil for more information.)

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER BROOK DEWALT, USN (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Hello. I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense Bloggers Roundtable program for Friday, July 11th, 2008. My name is Lieutenant Commander Brook DeWalt with the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Public Affairs, and I will be moderating our call today.

A note to our bloggers on the line today: Please remember to clearly state your name and your blog or organization in advance of your question. Please respect our guests' time, keeping questions succinct and to the point.

Today our guests are Lieutenant Colonel Ronald Wilt and Master Sergeant Jeffrey Flight. Lieutenant Colonel Wilt and Master Sergeant Flight recently returned from Southern California and will be taking -- talking about the Air Force Reserve's firefighting missions over there. Both Reservists are from the 302 Airlift Wing, if I'm correct, based out of Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado. And if I'm incorrect, I'm sure they're going to correct me on this. (Chuckles.)

Lieutenant Colonel Wilt is the 302 Operations Group commander, and Master Sergeant Flight is the 302 Operations Group chief loadmaster/flight evaluator. We're pleased to have you folks on our call today. We really appreciate it. Lieutenant Colonel Wilt and Master Sergeant Flight, if you'd like to please begin with any opening comments.

COL. WILT: Sure. Real quick, this is Lieutenant Colonel Ron Wilt from the 302nd Airlift Wing, with Senior Master Sergeant Jeffrey Flight.

Our overall mission statement is citizen airmen providing superior global reach. And with that, one of our specialized missions is the Modular Airborne Fire Fighting System, or MAFFS, which more or less supplements the commercial air tankers in combating the wild land fires with safe aerial delivery of the fire retardant on the actual fire.

My experience is roughly 13 years, starting my 14th year in the firefighting business in MAFFS. I'm an instructor pilot with them. And just to make a correction, I'm the deputy commander for the 302nd Operations Group.

And then, Jeff, your experience?

SGT. FLIGHT: Morning, Senior Master Sergeant Jeff Flight, here. I've been flying MAFFS for five years now. As a load master, our responsibilities are to ensure that the retardant and the air servicing is loading on an aircraft correctly, in a timely fashion, and then we set the system up in flight and get it ready to drop on the fire or next to the fire as it slows the fire down.

I've been flying MAFFS for five years now. I'm an instructor- level MAFFS qualified. And also there's a new system called MAFFS II that's coming out real soon, and qualified to fly that system also.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Fantastic. And now -- and just for clarification, when you're saying "MAFFS" is that -- I know it's the acronym for Modular Airborne Fire Fighting System, but is it -- are you spelling that M-A-F-S?

COL. WILT: M-A-F-F-S.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: M-A-F-F-S.

COL. WILT: Right. That's also our call sign. If you were actually airborne or listening to some of the audio tapes over the fire, we go by our call signs with the -- there's eight systems assigned out there to the military. Two of them are assigned the Colorado Springs unit or the 302nd Airlift Wing, and they are MAFFS two and five. There's Charlotte Air National Guard is involved from North Carolina. We also have Wyoming Air National Guard and we also have the Channel Islands Air National Guard.

Right now, because Channel Islands has J-model C-130s, up until this point they have not been able to fly their systems. So Charlotte and Colorado Springs or the 302nd has more or less picked up the third airplane for them, each flying three so we can maintain eight systems to support the firefighting.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Fantastic. At this point, if our blogger on the line would like to introduce himself and go into any questions you might have.
Q Good morning. My name is Chuck Simmins; I'm with America's North Shore Journal. Colonel, if you would, could you describe the aircraft you fly and how the system is integrated into the aircraft?

COL. WILT: Sure. Let me let Senior Master Sergeant Flight answer that question.

Jeff?

SGT. FLIGHT: We're a C-130 four-engine turboprop aircraft. We're designed for short-haul missions, landing on dirt runways, tactical airlift, as far as dropping equipment, supplies and paratroopers at a certain location.

This mission is a specialized mission. There's only eight C-130s in the entire Air Force that do this mission. The MAFF is a self- contained reusable 3,000-gallon system that is loaded into the aircraft. It takes up just about the entire aircraft, from the cargo department, from the front to the back. It's a series of five tanks that holds five gallons each, and then it has two 18-inch-diameter tubes that hold about another thousand gallons or 500 to a thousand gallons. And it's pressure-operated. And we can adjust the pressure according to what the Forest Service needs on the ground.

Q Sergeant, you had the tanks -- maybe I misheard you -- you said that they had five gallons each. Did you mean --

SGT. FLIGHT: Five hundred gallons, actually.

Q Five hundred gallons?

SGT. FLIGHT: Yeah, 500.

Q So you're carrying 2,500 gallons of water in the tanks, and another thousand in the piping.

SGT. FLIGHT: We typically don't load over 3,000 gallons. That's -- our typical load will be 3,000 gallons. We'll limit it at that. We won't go higher than that.

COL. WILT: And it's not water. It's actually a retardant. It mixes a powder, which is either Foscheck or Firetrol, with water to more or less come up with the retardant, if you will, liquid-based, which is more or less dispersed and acts like a mist that falls down onto the foliage. And it's more or less like a syrup or a very sticky substance that adheres to the foliage and it retards the fire.

It has a property, though -- and it's also colored. It comes out and it lays down, at first, in a bright red, basically to identify where retardant has been. After several days, approximately five days, of sunlight, that retardant will actually fade away. And then it also has properties of fertilizing the area. Once the fire's done, it'll actually fertilize and promote growth in that wildland area.

Go ahead.

Q Okay. The -- when you disperse the retardant, does it disperse from the body of the aircraft or from wing or -- how do you go about releasing the retardant?

COL. WILT: That's an excellent question. Basically it's out of our ramping door. We open up a ramping door in a similar fashion that we do our airdrop of equipment for normal wartime fighting.

We more or less open the ramping door and drop down some tubes. These tubes go out the back end of the aircraft. And then it is the pressurized system that pushes out the retardant, from the back of the aircraft, from the ramping door.

Q Okay. And what would a typical number of crewmen? And what would their positions be titled on the aircraft?

COL. WILT: We have six crew members on the aircraft. We've got an aircraft commander, a co-pilot, a flight engineer and a navigator in the front, more or less in the cockpit of the airplane.

Then we've got two load masters that control the system in the back of the aircraft. One manages a control system. The other one more or less checks on how things are going with the tanks, the tubes and making sure that everything is dispersed properly.

Q Okay. And which position would act as the -- call it the bombadier, the guy that says, okay, let her go.

COL. WILT: That normally is done by the co-pilot up front. With this system, as it's put onboard, there's a wiring system with a drop button that's based on his seat.

Since the pilot or the aircraft commander is flying the aircraft, the co-pilot, after coordination with the lead airplane, will define a point. And based on a certain angle, he'll actually drop the load, push the button.

And there is a backup system with everything else. If something fails, the load master also, based on the communication with the crews, if for some reason the system doesn't go out -- there's a malfunction electronically with the button -- the load master can also release the load up from the back.

Q Okay.

Now, you fly out of local airports wherever the fire happens to be, correct? COL. WILT: Only those that are designated to support MAFFS and that get certified based on the Forest Service, if you will. It is -- we try and get as close as we can to the fire but meet the needs of the aircraft and other support functions to make all this happen.

Q Okay. That heads in the direction I was going. You don't bring your own ground crew. The retardant is loaded by Forest Service personnel?

COL. WILT: It's actually a mixture. It's an interagency-type process. For the most part, we do bring our own maintenance crew which then, as we go in and out of an area called the pits, if you will, which is where we actually load the retardant.

We have our own maintenance crew that provides ground support functions. They actually clean the airplane during the time that it's loading. And for the most part, Forest Service personnel are working air compressors and the mixing of the retardant in the large tanks set by or the portable pits, sometimes they're called. There are some pits that are put up to actually load the 3,000-plus gallons in which we actually pump out from those systems into the aircraft modular system itself.

So around the aircraft itself, we more or less use military personnel. And then hooking up the hoses, if you will, is done by the Forest Service personnel. And operating the compressor and the retardant system is done by Forest Service personnel.

Q Okay. The -- a question for the Colonel: You've got about 24,000 pounds of retardant on board. As you're dispersing it, the flying characteristics of the aircraft change. How do -- how much of an adaptation is that to learn how to deal with that?

COL. WILT: Actually, the system is set up to maintain the center of balance, if you will, or the center of gravity on the aircraft, the way it actually disperses. One of the things, in order to do MAFFS, to be qualified or certified in providing this service, is, we actually go through a checkout. They're actually selected -- people are actually hand-selected based on their experience. You need highly experienced crew members to do it.

And then beyond that, depending on what you're actually flying, as far as characteristics, it's actually a heavier aircraft. When the retardant leaves the aircraft itself, the engineering design is such that it tries to maintain a center of gravity, more or less.

For example, he mentioned five tanks. And a simple way of explaining that is on the discharge they'll more or less discharge number one and five, then four and two, and then number three as far as dispersing the retardants. So it maintains a center of gravity, with the assumption that number three tank is at the center point of -- center of gravity of the aircraft.

Q Thank you. How long to load and then how long to release?

COL. WILT: Okay. A couple things. And I think you mentioned it was 24,000. It actually works out to be about 28,000 pounds of retardant. It's about -- a little bit over nine pounds per gallon. In loading the retardant itself, this last week it took only eight minutes to load.

Usually we're -- on average, we probably are airborne within 20 to 25 minutes from landing. I've had as little as 11 minutes between touchdown to takeoff in my experience, but normally it's probably 20 to 25 minutes between touchdown to takeoff to get back to the battle with the fire.

Q And then dispersing it, how long does that take?

COL. WILT: That only takes about eight seconds, so it's very quick. And some of that depends -- I don't know if you heard, we have the capability of changing the amount of retardant that's discharged. What I mentioned with eight seconds is based on a full-coverage level of what's known as level four or 40 pounds per square inch. Depending of the foliage or the type of fire, of how much fuel it has -- if it's light fuels, they may ask for lighter coverage, something like one or two. If it's very heavy fuels, they'll ask for as much as we can get.

On a side note, with that -- with the new system, MAFFS II, we're able to actually go up to level eight. During this last fire, there were several times that they were asking for a full load and some of the commercial tankers, they were asking for level six because of the heavy foliage that we were dropping on.

Q Okay. And what kind of a footprint, when you drop, does it leave? What size footprint?

COL. WILT: Again, depending on the -- if we're discharging the full load, one thing we didn't mention was we have the capability -- it's known as incremental -- and we can discharge just a portion of the load. But the full load -- with a full load at the full charge -- would be approximately 150 feet wide to -- or, excuse me, 150 yards wide to probably 450 yards long.

Q Now, I've read stories of a fellow on the ground that had been hit by the stuff. It's unpleasant but it's not incredibly dangerous, if I read the stories correctly. Does that -- am I drawing the correct conclusion?

COL. WILT: I would not necessarily say it's unsafe. Now, normally -- and I mentioned a lead plane earlier -- there's a lot of coordination, just like a normal battle with the military. The lead airplane coordinates with the incident commander on the ground. And prior to us going in to drop, he makes

sure that all personnel and all vehicles are clear of the area. And they coordinate with Helicon to make sure all the helicopter operations are out of the area, too. Now, that doesn't mean from time to time that that hasn't happened. I'm sure, based on the stories you've heard, some retardant has fallen; and there have been people in the area that, for some reason, they weren't aware that folks were in the area or, based on where they were, they had to drop the retardant for protection for those folks, because they were more or less trapped in the area.

But it is somewhat dangerous. It's not something that's very light. It actually kicks up rocks or -- large rocks and even small boulders that will actually move around. So I would say the person, if they were in the area, was probably fairly lucky. For the most part, it's not recommended to be in the area when the retardant drops, the actual retardant drops.

Q Okay. Now, how long were you involved in this mission? And how many drops did your unit make?

COL. WILT: Sure. What we and try and do, based on the fatigue level of the operations, we more or less swap out on an approximate weekly basis. We are able to stay there longer than that. We were there for just one week, and in that week we've actually dropped 25 -- made 25 drops on probably -- I believe it's been about four fires that we dropped on, maybe five fires, as a total. The average is probably somewhere in between 25 to 30 per week. It can actually get higher, depending on how close we are.

It was earlier -- earlier, it was mentioned that we were working down in Southern California. We're actually based in Sacramento at McClellan Airfield, and we're working both with North Cal and South Cal. Right now, for the most part, the request has been made by North Cal, but the smoke has been laying down in a lot of the fires in the northern portion of California, so we've been attacking some fires down in the south. Some names you're familiar with is probably Big Sur, Bakersfield. Those are some of the fires we've gone down south to. But they are somewhat long-range. It takes in between two to two and a half hours round trip to the fire, back to the air base.

Q Okay, and you're operating at what kind of altitudes over the ground.

COL. WILT: Over the ground itself, when we release, the ideal altitude is approximately 150 feet above the top of the foliage. So we're probably in between 150 to 200 feet above the ground, weighing approximately 140,000 pounds.

Q That's the aircraft, the personnel and the retardant onboard.

COL. WILT: That's correct.

Q All right, Lieutenant Commander, I think I've run through my questions.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Okay. I've got a couple others, if you don't mind.

How long has your unit been involved in these types of missions in the past?

COL. WILT: For the 302d, we've been involved since 1993. I've been involved since 1995. It's been going on for quite a while. Before the 302d had

it, March Air Force Base used to have 130s. And they participated in the MAFFS operations. And when they were more or less deactivated, they transferred the mission over to the 302d.

Q Okay, fantastic.

And how did your unit get tapped for this mission in particular?

COL. WILT: Well, on a side note, I'd like to think, it's based on our professionalism and our experience and the quality of airmen that we've got.

One of the reasons I really think it was chosen was, we are the westernmost reserve C-130 out here. And most of the dangerous wildland fires are out in the West, if you will, California, Oregon, Montana, Idaho, Washington. That's why you've got three organizations out here, one in the Southeast.

A normal fire pattern or year, you'll see, fires typically in early summer starting in the Southeast, moving across the Southwest. And then they'll move up to the Northwest. So we've got two units assigned to the Charlotte Air National Guard out at North Carolina, and then the other three units -- one in Wyoming, one in Colorado here, and then one in Channel Islands in California; it's south. So three of those organizations, that have six systems, are based out here in the West. And I think that's why we were chosen, based on our location.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Okay. And I'd like to also know, what do you each consider the hardest part of the firefighting mission?

COL. WILT: What do you think, Jeff?

SGT. FLIGHT: The hardest part? I'd say probably towards the end of the week, people start getting tired. But the most impressive part that goes hand-in-hand with that is we're trained in crew resource management and it's all crew positions and crew members looking out for each other in there. And we have strict training on this. And you really see that training kicking in towards the end of the week and really gel as one crew out there.

And I was really impressed last week, by the end of the week. We're flying some long days. It's a hundred-plus degrees outside. Everybody's attitude's amazing. And we really enjoy being together and working this mission because it's our most rewarding mission. I guess the hardest part turns out to be the most memorable part, as far as a favorable memory.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Great. And when -- do you expect that your units will return at some point to this cycle of fires or what do you anticipate ahead?

COL. WILT: Well -- and I guess I misled you -- we're actually there right now. We've swapped out crews. We actually have crews on- scene and we've got all eight systems up and running out there at McClellan Air Force Base -- or, excuse me, McClellan Airfield.

We're hoping to go out -- I believe Senior Master Sergeant Flight's going back out next Tuesday here, next week, for at least a week. I, myself, depending on requirements here, as far as some of my duties as the commander --

I'd like to go out as soon as possible, but I'll probably make it within a month or so.

To kind of fill in some things -- as we do swap-outs, the requirement, just so you know, is we are required to have five crews certified per system. So we've got more or less 10 crews certified as a minimum for this operation. I believe right now we've got 13 crews certified.

And that has to do with the global war on terror.

Besides here, we also have crews deployed overseas. So we increased our number, to support that and also to support the need, as we're transitioning to the MAFFS II system, to support all eight systems.

We've actually got a third crew involved with the operations. So out of the eight crews, the 302d has three deployed all the time. We just do a swapout and changes crews on roughly a week basis.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Excellent. Okay.

I don't have any other questions.

Chuck Simmins, did you have any other final questions?

Q No, just to say, fellows, thank you very much for your service for our country. And thank you for the interview.

SGT. FLIGHT: You're welcome, sir.

COL. WILT: You're welcome.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Fantastic.

I want to thank everybody. We've had some great questions and comments today. As we wrap up today's call, I would like to ask Colonel Wilt and Master Sergeant Flight if they have any final comments.

COL. WILT: Real quick again to summarize what we end up doing, like I said, I talked about our mission statement before. But again it's to supplement the commercial air tankers in combatting the wildfires.

And in so doing it really gives the crew members and, I think, the organization a lot of pride, in supporting the citizens down there whose more or less livelihood might be going, possibly destroyed. It's a great feeling.

And that's what, I think, Senior Master Sergeant Flight was trying to allude to, is that you feel a lot of pride, to directly support your neighbors out there and to try and, you know, fight this enemy but do it very safely as well. SGT. FLIGHT: Looking forward to a long, hot summer in front of us and flying this mission probably at least till the middle of September.

As a scheduling standpoint, we have to tell people, they're going to have to wait a week, because we have more than enough volunteers to do this mission, because it is so rewarding. And it puts a lot of pride in our reserve unit.

We are citizen airmen and reservists. But like Colonel Wilt was saying, we have crews over in the desert. We have crews flying MAFFS mission.

We feel like an active-duty unit, because we're constantly busy. But this is our choice, and we really enjoy what we do. And this mission is -- you know, we take pride in it, because it's -- we feel like we're the top of the air crew out there doing this.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Great. And also -- this is Lieutenant Commander DeWalt -- one more question, related exactly to that. What are your civilian employment out there free to you?

COL. WILT: Well, believe it or not, you're talking to two Air Reserve technicians, if you will. We work -- what that means is, we're somewhat full-time. We keep the management -- we work civil service, if you will, during the week, and we're Reservists, when necessary, when we're doing our military duties.

There are several folks, especially the pilots, that are airline pilots, and a lot of times they'll drop trips, if you will, coordinate with their employers to support this mission.

So we do have people -- once they know about it, they talk to their employers. And we get great support from the employers as well.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: That's fantastic. Well, thank you both.

Now, just to conclude today, today's program will be available online at the bloggers link on dod.mil, where you're able to access a story based on today's call, along with source documents, such as the interviewees' bios, this audio file and print transcripts.

Again, I'd like to thank Colonel Wilt and Master Sergeant Flight and our blogger participants. This does conclude today's call, and please feel free to disconnect at any time. Thank you all very much.

Q Thank you.

COL. WILT: Thanks, Commander.

SGT. FLIGHT: Thank you.

END.